

THIS IS ME

Week #1 of the 6-Week Series, "The Songs of Life"

April 24, 2022

With Rev. Richard Maraj

Lyrics – "This Is Me" (from 'The Greatest Showman')

I'm not a stranger to the dark

Hide away, they say

'Cause we don't want your broken parts

I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars

Run away, they say

No one will love you as you are

But I won't let them break me down to dust

I know that there's a place for us

For we are glorious

When the sharpest words wanna cut me down

I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out

I am brave, I am bruised

I am who I'm meant to be, this is me

Look out 'cause here I come

And I'm marching on to the beat I drum

I'm not scared to be seen

I make no apologies, this is me

Another round of bullets hits my skin

Well, fire away 'cause today, I won't let the shame sink in

We are bursting through the barricades

And reaching for the sun (we are warriors)

Yeah, that's what we've become

Won't let them break me down to dust

I know that there's a place for us

For we are glorious

When the sharpest words wanna cut me down

Gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out

I am brave, I am bruised

I am who I'm meant to be, this is me

Look out 'cause here I come

And I'm marching on to the beat I drum

I'm not scared to be seen

I make no apologies, this is me

...This is me

And I know that I deserve your love

There's nothing I'm not worthy of

When the sharpest words wanna cut me down

I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out

This is brave, this is bruised

This is who I'm meant to be, this is me

Look out 'cause here I come (look out 'cause here I come)

*And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
(marching on, marching, marching on)
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me*

*(Whenever the words wanna cut me down
I'll send the flood to drown them out)
I'm gonna send the flood, gonna drown them out
This is me!*

Message:

This is me! To me, this is one of the most powerful, inspirational, uplifting and affirming songs I think I've ever heard! It is hard not to love this song, and be moved by this song. Because I believe it touches a place deep inside that all of us can relate to. It touches that place in us that feels rejected; that place that feels that we don't measure up; that place where we feel insecure, embarrassed and even ashamed of ourselves or parts of ourselves to the point that we want to hide, because we feel broken or damaged.

You know, "This Is Me" -- I love this, because it's a triumphant song! It's a song of overcoming. It is a song of rising up. It is a song about reclaiming our power. And how? By accepting and being proud of who we are. By standing firm and living authentically, and saying, "This is me! This is who I am." And especially in the face of being disliked, discouraged and diminished.

I think every one of us -- if we're really honest with ourselves -- struggles with some level of wondering whether we're good enough. Wondering if we'll be loved or accepted or cherished if people knew everything about us. I think every one of us has some level of feeling on this.

Oprah absolutely believes that, because she interviewed thousands of people over her career. Thousands of people from all over the world. People from all walks of life. I mean, from kings and presidents to people who are homeless. From moms and dads and athletes and scientists, religious leaders ... I mean, everyone! And she found one thing was in common. At the end of the interview, every one of them said some version of this: "*Was that alright? Was that okay? Do you think they'll like it?*"

Every one of us -- no matter how successful or strong or powerful we are -- has some portion in us that wonders, "*Will you like me? Do I do okay? Will I be okay?*"

You know, this song is -- as you know -- from the movie, "The Greatest Showman," starring Hugh Jackman. And it's a story about P.T. Barnum, the king of circuses, I guess. And one of the things is he built it -- besides elephants and stuff -- around people who had oddities. You know, Tom Thumb, the very small individual; there's a mermaid person; and all kinds of different ... a bearded lady. And all the individuals in our society who were seen as unacceptable; who were laughed at and called names. Who decided to choose to just hide rather than just tolerate being rejected and ostracized. And Barnum brought them together as a special thing so people would pay to see them.

And this song originally was an inner dialogue of the bearded woman to share what she was experiencing. And they decided to change it to have her sing it out loud and have it represent the entire group, and give them a voice for the level of struggle they had in moving through this type of situation. And in the movie, the song is performed at a time where Barnum was trying to promote circuses and promote his. And they did a great performance, and then all the group of oddities went to go, and they barred them and slammed the door. And it was particularly devastating, because they were so accustomed to living in the shadows already. But here comes Barnum and actually gives them hope, shows them some love. And even he was embarrassed of them, and wouldn't let them in to this high society party to raise the funds.

And here are what the open words say:

***I'm not a stranger to the dark
Hide away, they say
'Cause we don't want your broken parts ...
No one will love you as you are***

And this is where they kick it up and take charge:

***But I won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious ...

I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies; this is me!***

This incredible song was written by the writing duo of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. And Benj said, when he was writing this trying to cultivate what that would be like, and he said that he turned to his own experience. And here's what he wrote: *"I'm a gay man who grew up in the closet when I was a teenager. You experience the world telling you that you're not loveable; that you're not acceptable; that you're different or something is wrong or broken about you; and you feel you have to either fix yourself or hide yourself."*

He continues: *"You start writing thinking of your own struggle, and you realize that everyone is struggling and dealing with this in some way."*

Interestingly, the actor, Keala Settle -- who played the bearded woman who sang this song -- said, *"This really hit close to home. It hit me in my place where I feel broken and wounded, to the point that I could not sing this song without breaking down and crying for the first several times. This song was a gift to me that helped me heal."*

You know, this universal struggle that we all have -- at some level of believing that we aren't enough -- is a reflection of what I think is the single greatest thing that limits and affects our ability to open our lives to greater love and happiness and success. And that is the lack of self-acceptance and the lack of self-love.

Steven Covey says something very interesting. He said that the difference between a scarcity mentality and an abundance mentality -- a mentality that sees limitation and lack and a mindset that sees unlimited abundance -- is directly related to how much acceptance and love we give ourselves. That how much we love and accept ourselves is the absolute single greatest indicator of how we treat ourselves; how we see the world of possibilities or the world of lack; how we do in relationships; how happy we are; how healthy we are; and what we think is possible for us. What we think we deserve. What we end up attracting and experience all comes down to this single thing: how much do we love and accept ourselves.

And one of the tough things about loving and accepting ourselves is how we affect what other people say about us. When people say things that diminish us or hurt us, or judge us in show way, we tend to take it in.

Have you ever had somebody say something to you that was hurtful or unkind? Or you felt diminished in some way? How we handle that is vital. And a good example of it is a story of these three frogs ...
[Congregation laughs] Come on, this is a true story! [Congregation laughs]

These three frogs: and they're hopping around this dairy area, and two of them jump into this pail. And it's filled half with fresh milk. And they're trying to jump out and jump out and jump out, and splashing and jumping. And they can't, because the walls are too steep in the bucket. There's not enough milk to get them to the top. And then the third frog jumps on the top of the rim and sees the situation, and then

he starts saying, *"It's hopeless! You're never going to get out! You're probably going to die there! Just face the facts and stop struggling, and just let yourself have a peaceful death!"*

And so the two of them keep bouncing up; they keep bouncing. And after a while, one of them just kind of gives up and sinks under; is not seen again. The other one looks up and sees the lips moving and the shouting of the third frog. And then, over time, realizes that things have gotten firmer, and he's able to jump out. Because he churned it to butter! [Congregation laughs] And so he jumps out and he gives a big hug and a smile to the third frog, expressing appreciation. And it kind of saved his life!

And do you know why these two things happened? The first one: the frog gave up because he listened to the negativity of the other person. And the other reason the other one succeeded and jumped out is because he was deaf. [Congregation and Rev. Maraj laugh]

And it's an example that sometimes you've got to turn a deaf ear when people are saying things that are not true, and do not buy it. Do not accept it! Because we will never accept the truth of ourselves if we keep listening to some of the negative things that people say around us.

Today we begin one of my favorite series of the year: "The Songs of Life." Using songs which touch us and move us in such profound ways. I'll bet every one of us has some favorite song that got us through a tough time. I'll bet every one of us has a song that we listen to when we need to cry and open our hearts. A song that calms and soothes us. Music does so many things to us! And besides calming us, soothing and exciting us, they can also teach us and inspire us how to live our lives in a greater and better way.

So we're going to do that over the next six weeks. And we're going to begin with this fabulous song, "This Is Me." And to me, it is a statement of self-acceptance and a statement of reclaiming our power: our personal power. This is me!

"This is me" is more than just three words; it's a mindset. It is a consciousness and a perspective that we should all acquire in how we live our lives.

To get a consciousness of "This Is Me," the first thing we need to do is **LOVE AND ACCEPT OUR IMPERFECTIONS**. Every one of us has some imperfections. How many people have a part of your body that you wish was thinner or bigger? [Congregation laughs] A part of your body you wish you had more of or less of? [Congregation laughs] A part of your body that you want to disown? That you want to distance yourself from? Anybody ever thought a thing like this: "I'll be beautiful if I just lose weight or fix this or change that; then I'll be acceptable and beautiful"?

I love one of the lines of the chorus. It says:

***When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
Gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out***

You know, you can't drown out the outer voices until you drown out the inner voice. That voice that says, *"I'm too fat; I'm too ugly. I'm not good enough. That I'll never succeed. Who am I kidding? I'm never going to meet someone, have a great relationship. I'm not smart enough. I can't handle that much money. I can't handle that much success."*

I would say one of the single things that we do that hurt ourselves more than anything else is when we judge ourselves. To judge and criticize and condemn; to put down ourselves; to devalue and diminish ourselves is one of the worst and most harmful things. We think "outside people" and what they say is the thing. No! It's what's going on in here; it's that inner dialogue.

And it's not just our bodies that we put down. We put down mistakes that we've made or areas in our life where we're not as gifted or talented as in other areas. Have you ever judged yourself? Or is there something you judge yourself for, and you're critical with yourself? I want you to think one of those things right now: one thing you are harsh with yourself or judge yourself for or dislike, or wish it was

different about you. And I ask you the question: What would it take for you to love and accept that part of you? In fact, what would it take for you to love and accept all of you?

You know, to love and accept our imperfections -- because we all have them -- is a vital thing. To stop hating them. Stop judging them. If we ever want to find inner peace; if we ever want happiness and expand our lives to feel fuller, it must begin with accepting our imperfections.

Remember when one of the disciples asked Jesus, *"Why has this man been born blind? Is it something he did or his parents did?"* And Jesus said, *"No; this man has been born this way so that the glory of God could be made manifest in his life."*

And I believe every imperfection that we have -- everything we think is wrong or bad about ourselves -- is there to help us discover the glory of God. For whatever that thing might be, would you be willing to just shine God's light? To allow God to bring us a sense of peace? A sense of acceptance and compassion? A sense of love and joy and appreciation? To just literally surround that in light? Because, again, we can never experience full peace without acceptance. We can never open our lives to greater things unless we love ourselves as we are.

Many of you know that I was paralyzed in a car accident many years ago -- the day after I graduated from high school. And I spent six months in the rehab hospital, and told I'd never walk again. I was paralyzed and had many scars and all kinds of things. And one of the things: I hated it so much -- and myself so much -- that I would not look at myself in the mirror. I would do anything to avoid looking at myself.

I mean, sometimes we can get to the place ... I just wanted to distance myself from myself! And to feel "less than." And nobody was doing it to me; I did it to myself. I just wanted to hide. I didn't want to go anywhere; for people to look at me. Or I'd think they were thinking all these things.

But then there's a point I reached: *"Well, this is the only body I have."* And if I was going to live and do some stuff, I'd better start loving up and using this one as best as I can. And I still struggle with body stuff.

But the fact is: the most important work I think we can do is learn to love and accept ourselves. Spend less and less time judging and criticizing, but accepting -- and maybe even celebrating -- because God made us unique! We are different intentionally. And these things we think are weakness or bad are actually great teachers that actually help us move our lives in a direction to give gifts that we not have otherwise been able to give.

"I love and accept my body; this is me!"

Let's say that together: [with congregation] *"I love and accept my body; this is me!"*

Take a deep breath into that.

"I love and accept my imperfections; this is me!"

Together: [with congregation] *"I love and accept my imperfections; this is me!"*

"I love and accept who I am; this is me!"

Together: [with congregation] *"I love and accept who I am; this is me!"*

This is the first step into that consciousness of "This Is Me": is to be able to love and accept our imperfections.

The second one is to **OWN OUR BEAUTY AND OUR GREATNESS**. You know what's interesting? It's kind of understandable that we wouldn't accept the parts that we don't think are beautiful or great, but sometimes we have a hard time accepting some of the great and magnificent things about ourselves! Sometimes we ... Marianne Williamson's thing that said that we are afraid of our light more than our darkness!

Sometimes we're afraid of our greatness more than our weakness. You know, sometimes we're afraid of our brilliance and our magnificence. And we would often rather play "small" than show up as big as we know we can. We'd rather put ourselves down than build ourselves up. Sometimes I think we would rather hate ourselves than fully love and embrace ourselves, because we have this idea that loving ourselves is selfish or bad or egotistical or narcissistic.

Allan Cohen said the first and foremost responsibility we have in this life is to learn to love ourselves, because it is the thing that affects or limits or expands our ability to experience light, love, joy and everything else. Because we are the channel through which all of God's abundance flows, and by limiting and hating ourselves, we actually reduce our ability for God's blessings and greater love.

So my question for you is: How good are you at loving yourself? How good are you at supporting yourself and encouraging yourself and believing in yourself? How good are you at appreciating yourself and taking care of yourself? And in what way do you think you could do a better job loving you? A better job celebrating you? A better job honoring you and expressing you?

You know, I like to have people make a list of 20 things that they are good at; that they love about themselves; things that they're just talented at. Because sometimes we won't do it. And the fact is: it could be -- you could be -- good at math; you could be good at organizing; you could be good at being a writer or a teacher; or good at languages; or be good at cooking or dancing or parallel parking. [Congregation laughs] I mean, that's quite a talent, actually!

I mean, maybe it's you love your beautiful smile. Maybe love the fact that you're patient and you're kind and you're generous and understanding. And you're supportive and caring and creative. You know, maybe you have a good sense of humor. Maybe you're really good at telling jokes! [Congregation laughs] Or maybe you're good at thinking you're good at telling jokes! [Congregation laughs]

So this man's at the Pearly Gates ... [Congregation laughs]

And St. Peter asks him a question for his entrance. And he said, "*So, have you ever done anything to help someone else? You know, something really brave that really put yourself out to help someone else?*"

He said, "*Well, I can think of one thing. I was on this trip to the Black Hills in South Dakota, and I came across a gang -- a biker gang. A bunch of tough guys. And they were harassing and mistreating this woman. So I stopped my car and I rolled down my window and I said, 'Hey; hey! Stop that!'*"

"And they didn't. So I got out of my car and I walked up to the biggest, the most tattooed one, and I put my finger in his chest. And I said, 'If you don't leave her alone now, you're going to have me to deal with.' And to show them I meant business, I grabbed the nose ring out of his nose; ripped it out; threw it on the ground; and then I kicked over his bike. And I looked at him and I didn't even blink."

And St. Peter says, "*Wow! That is one of the bravest, most thoughtful things I ever heard in helping someone else.*" He said, "*When did it happen?*"

The guy said, "*Oh, about five minutes ago.*" [Congregation laughs]

You know, it's okay It's okay if you don't like it, because THIS IS ME! [Congregation laughs and applauds]

Hey, so here's what we're going to do. I want you to think of one thing you're good at. So mine would have been, "*I am good at telling jokes.*" I want you to think of one. Think of one thing you're good at. And what we're going to do in a second: we're going to turn to the person next to us and say, "*I am good at telling jokes; this is me!*"

Okay? So one person will say, "*I am good at this; this is me!*" And the next person will say, "*I am good at this; this is me!*" Let's do that now. Go ahead. [Congregation has conversations with one another]

Alright! So was that kind of cool? Because sometimes ... there are so many things we're good at, yet we sometimes don't ever say to ourselves -- let alone to other people -- that "*I'm good at this.*" There's

nothing arrogant or conceited; it's the truth of who you are! And it is a key factor in helping us all get to the place of saying, *"This is me!"*

The final thing I want to talk about that "This Is Me" is about **CLAIMING AND ALIGNING YOURSELF WITH YOUR HIGHER SELF**. With your spiritual nature.

Sometimes when people say, *"So who are you?" "Well, I'm Richard Maraj."*

Who are you? We think of our jobs; we think of our houses or achievements. You know, we think of our cars, or our possessions, the amount of money that we have. We think about our age. "This is me." We think of all those things. But if we limited our list of who we are to just those things, we would be woefully incomplete in our perspective of who we really are. Because the truth of who we really are -- and the most real and powerful part of ourselves -- cannot be seen. It's our spirit. It is our divine essence and our magnificence. That is who we are!

We are spiritual beings. We're not just physical beings or earthly beings; we are spiritual, divine beings, and we need to identify with that truth of who we are. If we want to get to the place of "This Is Me," that is a huge part of our "Me" that we need to own; that we need to express.

"I am a child of God; this is me!"

"I'm an amazing spiritual being; this is me!"

"I am the temple of the Living God; this is me!"

"I am the light of the world; this is me!"

We're going to do a little "call and response." I'm going to say something; your response is, *"This is me!"*

"I am a child of God!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"I am an amazing spiritual being!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"I am the temple of the Living God!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"I am the light of the world!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"My nature is spiritual!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"God has given me a spirit of power, love and self-discipline!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

"God and I are one!" [Congregation]: *"This is me!"*

And that is the truth! And for us to get to that place -- to live from that higher perspective of our true identity -- we need to take time in meditation every day. To silence ourselves and go to that quiet place where our spirit is one with the Divine. Where we open ourselves in the silence to know our oneness with the Living Spirit of God.

Every single one of us will feel rejected at times -- that we're not good enough, and feel powerless. But the truth is: we are powerful beyond measure! We are absolutely amazing beings! And what we need to do is no longer hide or feel ashamed of ourselves. God made us unique and wonderful!

Our work to do is to love and accept our imperfections: all of ourselves. It is to own our beauty and our greatness; don't be shy about letting your magnificence out. And, finally, it is to claim and align our higher self; our spiritual self; our divine identity. And when we do that, we will all be able to say proudly, confidently and thankfully -- and join me! -- *"THIS IS ME!"*

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]